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ABSTRACT

Homeschooling has grown over the past several decades. It is estimated that 923,700 to 1,275,098 children will be homeschooled by the 2001-02 school year. Homeschooling families come from all major ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds and all income levels. Homeschooling parents are commonly active in their communities and join community and volunteer associations. Today, homeschooling is legal in all states. State laws generally require homeschooling parents to file basic information with a state or local education agency. More than half of the states require evaluation such as testing, portfolio evaluations, or teacher evaluation. Parents do not need teaching certificates. Mothers commonly play the dominant role in the children's education, though fathers usually pitch in. Local and state support groups offer advice and assistance. There is at least one state-level homeschooling association in every state. Popular resources include libraries, museums, colleges, parks departments, churches, local businesses, and schools. Available test data show that homeschoolers do well. For example, one study of 12,000 homeschooled children showed that they placed in the 62nd to 91st percentile of national norms. Disagreement exists, however, about whether homeschooling helps or hinders a child's social development. Public opinion, though mixed, is generally positive with regards to homeschooling. (Contains 13 references.) (RT)

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Homeschooling—educating children under the supervision of parents instead of school teachers—has grown steadily over the past several decades. In an earlier era, many children studied at home. But by the beginning of the twentieth century, schools had become commonplace and states had adopted compulsory school-attendance laws. Only a few states allowed homeschooling as an exception to the attendance requirement. A few more required parents only to educate their children, without specifying the means.

As a result, homeschoolers risked fines or jail sentences in most states. A lucky few lived in jurisdictions that would not prosecute homeschoolers. Other families found protection in public or private schools that allowed children to enroll in "independent study" and then sent them home. Most families just hoped to avoid notice. Gradually, state by state, the legislature, a state court, an attorney general, or a state board made homeschooling legal.

This Digest discusses the extent of contemporary homeschooling and its legal status, describes available resources, presents evidence on the performance of homeschoolers, and notes how public opinion regarding the practice has changed over time.

How Many Children Are Homeschooled?

The homeschooling population has grown from some 10,000 to 15,000 children in the late 1960s to perhaps one million children by 2001 (roughly 2 percent of the school-aged population). The National Center for Education Statistics, based on a spring 1999 household survey, estimated that from 694,000 to 958,000 children in grades K-12 were in full- or part-time homeschooling (Bielick and others 2001).

The rate of growth may be slowing. Examination of reports from eighteen states (Bunday 2001) suggests 11 percent growth per year from fall 1995 through spring 1998. That's a sharp drop from an annual growth rate of 24 percent for the same states in the preceding three years. Assuming annual growth of 10 percent, from 923,700 to 1,275,098 children would be homeschooled by the school year 2001-02.

Families that elect to educate their children at home come from all major ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, and all income levels. However, homeschoolers are more likely to be religious, conservative, white, better educated, and part of a two-parent family, compared with the average American family. Homeschooling families tend to have more children and be middle-class (Bielick and others 2001; Henke and others 2000; Rudner 1999).

Parents who homeschool their children are more likely to vote, contribute money to political causes, contact elected officials about their views, attend public meetings or rallies, or join community and volunteer associations (Smith and Sikkink 1999). This holds true even when researchers compare only families with similar characteristics, including education, income, age, race, family structure, geographic region, and number of hours worked per week.

What Is the Legal Status of Homeschooling?

Today homeschooling is legal in all states. State law generally requires homeschooling parents to file basic information with either the state or local education agency. Over half the states require some kind of evaluation under some or all of the home-schooling options available under state law. Usually, this evaluation involves testing of students, but some states accept portfolio evaluations or a teacher evaluation. Much less frequently, states have education or testing requirements for parents. Some states require submission of a curricular plan. Parents do not need teaching certificates.

The United States Supreme Court has not explicitly ruled on homeschooling, though it is clear that reasonable regulations will be allowed. The Court has found constitutional problems with compulsory school requirements in *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), a limited decision involving the Amish. *Yoder* has led some lower courts to extend more protection to homeschooling families with a religious orientation, compared with those with a secular orientation.

A new source of legal tension has emerged over requests for part-time access to public-school curricular or extracurricular programs. Much depends on the state's legal and policy environment. The U.S. Department of Education regards homeschooling children (and all privately educated children) as eligible for federally funded programs, such as its program for disadvantaged children, if a child meets the district's criteria for such assistance.

What Resources Do Homeschooling Families Use?

Parents are, of course, the primary resource. Typically, the mother takes the lead, though fathers usually pitch in. Perhaps as many as one out of ten fathers takes the primary responsibility.

Local and state support groups offer advice and assistance. Sometimes, several families will share instructional duties. Local support groups form readily if there are a sufficient number of homeschooling families in an area. There is at least one state-level homeschooling association in every state, and in some states there are a dozen or more regional associations. Often, parents may examine instructional materials at a book fair or association meeting.

Other popular resources include libraries, museums, colleges, parks departments, churches, local businesses, and schools. Many large and small publishers offer curricular packages,

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books, periodicals, and other materials for use in home instruction.

Public programs are growing. Alaska sponsors the Alyeska Central School, where teachers in Juneau work with students all over the state via mail, the Internet, telephone, and occasional home visits. In California, children can enroll in a public school's independent-study program. Washington and Iowa laws require public schools to admit students part-time. Some public schools offer specialized homeschooling centers where families may obtain resources and instructional support, or where children may take classes (Hardy 2001; Lines 2000b). An estimated 18 percent of children who are homeschooled enroll in school part-time; 5 percent enroll for 9 or more hours per week (Bielick and others 2001).

How Well Do Homeschoolers Perform Academically and Socially?

Researchers cannot tell whether the *same* children would perform better or worse academically in a classroom or at home. State testing data do not necessarily reflect all homeschoolers because not all comply with the testing requirement. Other testing efforts rely on volunteers.

Keeping that caveat in mind, where testing data are available, homeschoolers do well. For example, in Alaska, the state's Alyeska Central School has tested its homeschooling children for several decades. As a group they usually score above average in any subject area and at all grade levels. The largest study to date, commissioned by the Home School Legal Defense Association, involved 12,000 students tested through the Bob Jones University testing services. The homeschooled children placed in the 62nd to the 91st percentile of national norms, depending on grade level and subject area (Rudner 1999).

At least one intriguing study suggests that student achievement for homeschoolers is not related to the educational attainment of the parent (Duvall and others 1997). This is consistent with tutoring studies that suggest the education level of a tutor has little to do with achievement of a tutored child.

College admission also may suggest success. Homeschoolers have reported admission to over 1,000 different U.S. colleges and universities (Bunday 2001).

People disagree about whether homeschooling helps or hinders a child's social development. Homeschooling children spend less time with peers and more time with people of different ages. Most participate in scouting, church groups, and other associations. Many volunteer in their communities. Some operate a business. There is no conclusive research suggesting that additional time with same-aged peers is preferable to more time with individuals of varying ages.

Have Public Attitudes About Homeschooling Changed?

An annual Gallup poll indicates public opinion is mixed. Respondents who regard homeschooling as a "bad thing" dropped from 73 percent in 1985 to 57 percent in 1997 (Rose and others 1997). In 1988, when asked whether parents should have a right to choose homeschooling, 53 percent thought they should (Gallup and Elam 1988).

Eighty-two percent of respondents in 1988 agreed that those providing instruction at home should "be required to meet the same teacher certification standards as the public schools." In 1997, 88 percent agreed that homeschools should "be required to guarantee a minimum level of educational quality." And in 1999, 92 percent said that children educated at home should take all the state and national assessments required of public-school students (Rose and Gallup 1999).

The 1999 Gallup survey asked, for the first time, about publicly supported services for homeschooled children. Access to special-education courses in public schools was favored by 92 percent of respondents; 80 percent would allow homeschooling teachers to participate in teacher-development activities; 74 percent would allow participation in school extracurricular activities; 73 percent would allow children to enroll in driver's education; and 53 percent would provide transportation services.

In sum, the growth rate in home instruction is slowing. Legal issues now focus narrowly on specific regulations or access to resources. Public programs for homeschoolers are on the rise. Where test data are available, children educated at home continue to do well. Acceptance of this option is growing, though the public would like to see the practice regulated.

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